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Women's Wartime Life Writing in Early Twentieth-century China

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Li Guo,

"Women's Wartime Life Writing in Early Twentieth-century China"

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Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 17.3 (2015)**

Thematic Issue ***Life Writing and the Trauma of War***. Ed. Louise O. Vasvári and I-Chun Wang

<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol17/iss3/>>

Abstract: In her article "Women's Wartime Life Writing in Early Twentieth-Century China" Li Guo discusses military diaries, prison memoirs, and autobiographical reportages. These documents offer rich insights into the political endeavors and military mobility of women. Guo analyzes Bingying Xie's 1928 war diary about the Chinese nationalists' northern expedition, Lanqi Hu's 1937 book about anti-Japanese activism, and Lang Bai's 1939 reportage about the Sino-Japanese War and argues that these texts allow women to reconfigure the discourse of nation through experimental life writing in order to develop the genre with tales of valor, hope, struggle, and heroism. Guo argues that contrary to the perception that early twentieth-century Chinese women's military activism was facilitated through assimilation into male identities, Xie's, Hu's, and Bai's texts show that women celebrated their womanhood through mass mobilization and dedicated services at the front as soldiers, activists, and reporters.

LI GUO

Women's Wartime Life Writing in Early Twentieth-century China

A historical review of women's wartime autobiographies in early twentieth-century China offers rich insights into pioneering and understudied works including military diaries, prison memoirs, and autobiographical reportages. In the present study I analyze three autobiographical texts by soldier writer Bingying Xie (謝冰瑩 1906-2000), exile writer Lang Bai (白朗 1912-1991), and social activist Lanqi Hu (胡蘭畦 1901-1984). Xie's 1928 *從軍日記* (War Diary) about the Northern Expedition -- a military campaign aimed at uniting China and ending a warlord period -- established a model of female military agency. Hu, an anti-Japanese activist imprisoned in nazi-ruled Germany authored *在德國女牢中* (*In a German Women's Prison*) in 1937 which was published in 1939. The diary is a compelling narrative about women's resistance against political oppression and expands the horizon of China's war resistance narratives to the global scene of World War II. Bai's 1939 autobiographical reportage *我們十四個* (*The Fourteen of Us*) records her experience of leaving her family and her infant to join the literary society of the Writers' Interview Group during China's anti-Japanese War (1937-45). The potential of these works allows women to reconfigure national discourse through experimental life writing. Their creative endeavors lend authority to a female self-reflexive narrator and infuse the genre with tales of valor, hope, struggle, and heroism. These authors wrote compelling stories about women's resistance against political oppression and their collective consciousness for freedom and thus add to our global perspective on war narratives. Against the backdrop of warfare, women became "agents in current events and their capacity to assist in the creation of a new social and political order" (Dooling 13). Women's political endeavors, through the circulation of their autobiographical writings, had an international impact and demonstrated Chinese women's military mobility to a global audience. The French translator of Xie's War Diary, Deyao Wang, recalls the influence of the French translation of Xie's War Diary and claims that the work corrected French readers' preconception about "servile" Chinese women, readers who "from now on got to know that there are new women in China who do not bind their feet and are courageous female soldiers!" (Xu 96). Simultaneously, these texts also expose tensions between self-consciousness, political alienation, and the ideological control to which women were subjected in wartime China.

Women soldiers enjoyed increased political autonomy, social elevation, and even "a sacred glamour" during World War I. In similar ways, revolutionary women in early twentieth-century China received social endorsement thanks to their political undertakings. Xie is considered as the first Chinese female soldier writer. Hu was appointed as the first female general by the Nationalist Government for her contribution to the anti-Japanese resistance. Nationalist and patriotic discourses bestowed upon these women new facets of subjectivity as "female soldiers," "women generals," or "battlefield writers." Some were likened to the legendary warrior Mulan who cross dressed as a man to replace her father in the battlefield and became a general. However, such comparisons reflect an absence of selfhood in military women and they embodied substitute "sons" serving a patriotic goal (see, e.g., Zito and Barlow; for a comparison of Mulan and the Hispanic ballad *La doncella guerrera*, see Vasvári). Wartime women's writings entail tensions between the authors' narrators' self-consciousness and the overall political alienation and ideological control to which they were submitted. Some feminists consider feminine autobiographies as "self-expressions" and assume that women's identity emerges from a consciousness located in the narrating subject. Others approach the autobiographical speaker as a performative subject who derives her sense of identity from the consciousness of fragmented experiential history (see Smith 108). With these questions in mind, this study reconsiders women's narratives of their fates, vulnerability, and sacrifice as correlated to their stylistic choices.

Xie was born in 1906 in Xinhua County, Hu'Nan province in South China. A social activist, writer, and journalist, Xie was the author of several memoirs including her 1928 *從軍日記* (War Diary) and her 1936 *一個女兵的自傳* (*A Woman Soldier's Own Story*). Xie's father was a provincial official of the late Qing government and a Confucian scholar. Xie's mother, a strict and traditional woman, bound Xie's feet when she was young. Xie first studied at a boy's missionary school and then transferred to Hu'Nan Changsha First Women's Normal School. In 1926 Xie entered the Central Academy of Military and Political Studies in the Women Students Brigade (the academy was founded by the Northern Expedition army which in turn was sustained by a coalition between the nationalist Kuomintang [KMT] and the Communist Party of China [CCP] [see Lee, Stefanowska, Wiles 227-29]). Then she joined the National Revolutionary Army and marched to the front in 1927. From the front, Xie wrote War Diary published in the nationalist journal *Central Media News* in 1928 (note: in the present study I am using the 1941 Shanghai edition). Lin Yutang translated sections of Xie's diaries into English and published them introducing Xie's work to an international audience (see Lin and Xie; the book was also translated to French, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, and Esperanto). After the Northern Expedition, Xie fled from an arranged marriage and travelled to Japan for study in 1931 and 1935. During her second sojourn to Japan she formed alliances with activist Japanese intellectuals and editors. In 1936, she refused to welcome the visiting emperor Puyi of Manchukuo in Tokyo, whom she deemed a puppet of Japan, and was imprisoned for more than three months where she finished *在日本獄中* (*In a Japanese Prison*). Fortunately, Xie was released after a couple of intellectuals intervened on her behalf through the Chinese embassy and she returned to China.

According to Jing Wang, Xie's texts are "autobiographies of the present" because Xie's "episodic life narratives" address events at the time of their occurrence and are very different from conventional retrospective autobiographies (167). Wang holds that Xie's life narratives are marked by a nascent style of "documentary life narratives" in which "the narrating time and the narrated time coincide, and

that the narrator and the subject are identical to the utmost degree" (167). Many episodes of War Diary were composed during short intervals in marching and sent as letters to the editor of *中央日報* (Central Daily News), the official news media of the KMT government. As Terry Siu-han Yip writes, the social context of Xie's time in the 1920s "witnessed an ideological shift from an advocacy of individual freedom to a celebration of national solidarity" (9). Yip argues that corresponding to the dominant nationalist discourse, Xie's work represents a "discoural and ideological change in the narration of the female self" (9) and he criticizes Xie's narrator as "unsexing" herself and taking on a masculinized militant role. The frontier was an extended social and political sphere and liberated women from "emotional and social-moral confinements," but it also "defeminize[d]" Xie and converted her from "a romantic dreamer" to "a romantic revolutionary" (Yip 10). Yip's critique provides an insightful view on progressive women's dilemma between individual pursuit and social and nationalist commitment. However, in my opinion Xie's diaries display much evidence of how she actively reconfigured her femininity rather than denying her womanhood.

Xie's life and work surpass Mulan's experience of taking on male roles and, in contrast to Mulan, Xie became a woman soldier in a transformative era of nationalist revolution (see Wang 168). Rather than sacrificing her femininity in exchange for power, Xie celebrates feminine solidarity at war. As reflected her War Diary, Xie was a leading participant of the so-called China Women Revolutionary Pioneers. She devoted herself to the education and liberation of rural women during the peasants' movements, organized Hu'Nan Women's Front Service Corps, and provided service at the frontline. She was committed to educating and communicating with peasants, workers, businessmen, and provincial women's associations and she believed in the mission of the Northern Expedition to resist feudal warlords to the benefit of ordinary people. For Xie, the frontier is a visionary site of women's self-discovery and provides the ground for the perception of women as military agents. In a letter to one of her brothers composed before she joined the Northern Expedition army, Xie elucidates her purpose of becoming a soldier. One is to care for and comfort the wounded soldiers at the battlefield and the other is to expand the publicity and impact of the nationalist movement among workers, peasants, and particularly women in the northern rural provinces. As she puts it "to seek women's liberation, we shall seek the victory of revolutionizing the whole society, to overthrow all our enemies and do away with the exploitative systems" (War Diary 107). The third purpose of going to the front is to enhance women's political participation in the nationalist revolution. Recalling revolutionary women in Russia and France, Xie laments the slavery imposed on Chinese women and appeals that "we shall use our own red blood to wash away the stains on Chinese women in the last several thousand years! With our heads we shall exchange man's happiness, the true happiness of freedom and equality" (War Diary 107). Xie describes the way to the front as "a blood-stained path" (War Diary 105). In Lin Yutang's view her heroism represents exceptional moral integrity which catered to wartime readers' demand for "a kind of spirited and resiliently forward-going revolutionary literature" (3). Lin's translations of Xie's diaries problematically identifies her writing as revolutionary literature. Xie's focus, however, is to portray progressive women at the front, to illustrate "our lives" to the outsiders, and record the unknown heroines who sacrificed their lives for global liberation.

Xie's illustration of women's consciousness, rather than being obliterated by the nationalist discourse, permeates her diaries. The compelling episode "給女同學" ("For My Female Schoolmates"), a political proclamation written in 1927 addresses more than one hundred and eighty fellow women soldiers who were enlisted in the women's branch of the nationalist Wuhan Central Military and political school. This unique branch was one of the first women's military group in China and the world at the time and considered it as its mission "to pursue the liberation of all the oppressed women on the globe" (War Diary 71). Xie emphasizes the necessity to become exemplary women soldiers, eliminate egotism and individual heroism, break through gender boundaries, and devote oneself to revolutionary practices. Xie stresses that to do away with gender differences between men and women, rather than obliterating womanhood, means to overcome the presumptions of women's weakness and inferiorities in comparison with men and seek equal social and political commitments. She reflects women's suffering in a global context, draws lessons from the failure of previous Chinese women's movements led by elite bourgeois intellectuals and highlights the social need to mobilize peasants and grass-root support to bring about the desired changes. Xie's strategic identification with oppressed women and her evocation of women's suffrage strike a careful balance between nationalist discourse and women's demand for self-fulfillment and she envisages women's identity as a political concept constructed through collective intervention.

Xie's uses her depiction of women's role in the Northern Expedition to mount social criticism, as well as to expand her role as a column contributor and political commentator. Whereas male editors and critics see her work as revolutionary battlefield literature, many of Xie's self-reflexive statements in War Diary are related to the limitation of the revolutionary discourse in advocating women's rights. Despite the blossoming women's movements in Hu'Nan, she found that she herself, a female soldier with unbound feet, became a spectacle among old-fashioned rural women (War Diary 31). Once because of her short hair and uniform a group of prostitutes mistook her for a male soldier. This outrageous experience makes her realize that to truly liberate women, one has to demolish the oppressing economic system which underlies gender inequality (War Diary 42). While working with a local women's organization in a rural county in Hu'Nan, Xie discovered that although most women had cut their hair to the modern style, they did not understand the meaning of political slogans nor were they willing to participate in mass movements (War Diary 20). In her later diary written during the Sino-Japanese War 在日本獄中 (In a Japanese Prison), Xie applauds progressive writers such as playwright Wei Bai who came to the frontline to provide service for wounded soldiers. Yet she also criticizes some writers who fled at the scene of blood-shedding and vainly boast their bravery on the media (In a

Japanese Prison 297). Thus readers of Xie's texts obtain an extensive view of the shifting political landscape of rural China and learn about the practical challenges of social revolution.

Xie's reflection in her diaries also speaks of a woman author's ethical dilemma and a tendency of self-censorship under the current political environment. Seán Burke comments that "feminist ideas on authorship will be inevitably political since authorship involves the appropriation of a cultural space and serves to underpin the principle of the literary canon which — on feminist thought — has been defined in terms of patriarchal prejudice" (145). In her War Diary Xie speaks of a reluctance to self-claim as a revolutionary writer when the editor urged her to publish her previous columns as a book two years after the Northern Expedition. Insisting that her writings are "not organized," "not crafted," and written without planning, Xie declines the title of a "writer" and states that she was "not writing, but rather speaking" in her works (War Diary 65). Disillusioned with the outcome of the Northern Expedition, Xie comments that "The situation now is very different. Back then those who we fought to overthrow now occupy high official posts; those who we held as 'sacred' are now shackled and forced to live in dark prisons. Since my diaries spoke for the latter, I am afraid of suffering oppression from the authorities, and thus I oppose the publication of this book" (War Diary 58). Such ethical concerns extend to her reflections on the authorial "I," which, as Gesa E. Kirsch remarks, "has social, ethical and political consequences for which authors bear responsibility" (78). In a later memoir, Xie confesses that "when I suffer any kind of assaults, I treat them as part of an ongoing novel. Or I may take myself as a character in a tragedy which is none other than life itself" (在日本獄中 [In a Japanese Prison] 93). This self-depiction as a fictional character mirrors Xie's understanding of her first-person narrator and bespeaks a politics of authorial staging in women's self-writing. Until today, Xie's autobiographical writings renders her a leading political figure in global anti-fascist movements. A journalist, teacher, soldier, social activist, and revolutionary pioneer, Xie's memoirs provide rich examples for feminist studies of the authorial subject in first-person narratives (see, e.g., Ng 58).

Similar to Xie, Hu is acknowledged for her role at the battle field. Born in 1901 in Chengdu, Hu was one of the seven women generals appointed by the Nationalist's Government. She attended the first Soviet Writers' Congress in Moscow and was praised by Maxim Gorky as "a true human being" (Langi Hu 278). She also served as the prototype for the "New Woman" character "Miss Mei" in the novel *虹* (*Rainbow*) by Mao Dun (茅盾), a book set on the backdrop of the so-called May Fourth movement, a sociopolitical reform movement between 1917 and 1921 (on women writers and the May Fourth movement see, e.g., Feng). Born to a father with a Ming loyalist background and a mother of literary accomplishments, she received a good education and later studied in Yuxiu Women's Normal School in Chengdu. In 1930 she went to Germany to study where because of her connection with the German Communist Party she was imprisoned for three months. In prison she composed her diary *在德國女牢中* (*In a German Women's Prison*), which was translated into Russian, English, German, and Spanish and established Hu's literary reputation in Europe. A few years later she went to the Soviet Union but owing to political difference with the authorities suffered surveillance and returned to China. During the Sino-Japanese War, Hu founded in Shanghai the Working Women's War Service Association and travelled across eight provinces to support the anti-Japanese cause. As a reward for her influential work, she was appointed the first female general by the Nationalist's Government and gained the name of "當代花木蘭" ("Today's Hua Mulan") and "戰地之花" ("Flower of the Battlefield"). In *a German Women's Prison*, thanks to its "discernible autobiographical impulse," exemplifies prison memoir as a political genre (see Dooling 14). Hu confesses that "all I had done was faithfully record the atrocities of the German fascists in suppressing the revolutionary masses and shared it with the world" (*In a German Prison* 15). What particular role does Hu's prison narrative play and what is its contribution to wartime reportage literature? What are the interpretations or audience responses to Hu's work in the context of women's global political activism?

Hu's reconfigures in her memoir the prison as a space of women's struggle against fascist hegemonic oppression through collective mobilization. Prison memoirs, as a significant form of life narrative, are written in diaries or letters by criminals or political prisoners who hold "a belief in one's moral innocence" and are written in a form of "raw" style (Jolly 729). Resonant with Xie's 1936 prison diary, Hu's memoir illustrates a women's prison as a site of women's spiritual growth and political activism. In prison, Hu formed an alliance with students, intellectuals, and workers among the women prisoners. At the death of the Russian female revolutionist Clara Zetkin in Moscow, Hu participated in preparing and sending a mourning telegraph on behalf of the women prisoners and organized an open demonstration against the Hitler regime. Hu recounts this demonstration and reflects on her and many women's efforts to transform the prison into a location of political resistance: "at a time of rampant Fascism, everyone faces the danger of being arrested and sent to prison ... Were it not for the sake of already being imprisoned, who could raise their fist and pay respect to this bellowed female revolutionist? Who could gather such a large congregation and sing 'The Internationale' for her, not to mention to send a mourning telegraph for her death?" (54). Because of their imprisonment, Hu and her friends had "a freedom that is inaccessible for those who are outside the prison" (55). Like "camels in a desert," women shoulder suffering and misery together: "when the storm is menacing, we shall stand closer to each other" (59). The diary provides a private record of Hu's survival through interrogation, starvation, and persecution, and also illustrates a how women faced with oppression build spiritual bond.

Aside from organized demonstrations, Hu depicts the diversity and plurality of women's political resistance. Enraged by the censorship that forbade writing and speaking in the prison, Hu attempted numerous times to take a pencil from the janitor and the women guards so that she could describe events in the prison and share these stories with Chinese readers, especially those in the northeastern part of the country who were fighting against the invading Japanese armies (92). She volunteered to be a cleaning worker to collect news and information from outside and to facilitate communication

among the prisoners. When the prison took in children and refused to provide treatment for a heavily ill prisoner, Hu and her fellow inmates organized an all-around hunger strike and forced the authorities to make compromises (123). To encourage each other, prisoners secretly performed a stage adaptation of Maxim Gorky's novel *Mother*. Deeply moved by the play, Hu praises her fellow prisoners for their passion, talent, and political activism which were not reduced at all by the daily struggle for survival (91). Prompted by the women inmates' protests, the prison alleviated the practice of using medicines in food to damage and manipulate women's health and sexual desire, which, according to Hu, was "against nature." As Hu reports, the Nazi prisons were full of pro-democratic individuals, as well as ordinary German citizens including workers, peasants, mothers, women activists, undercover spies, and prostitutes (257). Thus Hu encountered social groups from diverse socio-economic classes and learned about various political movements. Rather than being a solitary prisoner, Hu transformed the prison into a place of self-cultivation, political activism, and social involvement.

Hu's text consists of forty-four chapters with individual themes as titles and contains personal reflections, anecdotes, portraits of women prisoners, political activities, and records of on current affairs and societal issues. Hu's intimate narrative is mediated through life-like dialogue and scrupulous depictions of characters. It also contains letters exchanged with sympathetic friends outside of the prison. This stylistic hybridity shows that the text, rather than an autonomous first-person narrative, is polyphonic and positions the author's voice along the voices of others. The polyphony and plurality of voices in Hu's diary are embedded in many episodes in which Hu exchanges her political views with other prisoners. A pivotal episode takes place in a chapter in which Hu joins a heated debate with others about the fate of a fellow woman prisoner who had been thrown into a solitary cell as punishment for her participation in mourning Zetkin's death. An egotistical and apathetic inmate by the nickname of "Mrs. Theorist" blames the punished prisoner as "an idiot" who deserved the treatment, whereas other prisoners defend her for her deed. Here the authorial narrator's personal voice yields to the voices of the depicted women prisoners and their simultaneous dialogue with each other. The chapter's title "We Need Idiots" is a comment by a prisoner who negates "Mrs. Theorist's" stand (177). Hu's strategic adaptation of polyphonic autobiographical narration transforms traditional narration of the self into a member of the collective of women prisoners and delivers a group portrait of progressive women as agents of future social transformation.

The mixture of Hu's personal experience with political commentaries signifies the congruities between the private and the public. Four chapters in Hu's diary infuse personal account with her anti-fascist commentaries covering a wide range of topics such as Hitler's controversial racial identity "program," Hermann Göring's hypocritical involvement in the Animal Protection Committee, the government's endorsement of mass weddings, and Joseph Goebbels's economic policies which advocated a return to manual labor and the elimination of unemployment pensions. A compelling case is Hu's criticism of mass wedding ceremonies and the government's "awards" for marriages which re-allocated working women to the domestic sphere, forced hundreds of thousands of women workers to return home and play traditional, and manipulate women's political rights in the voting process (230). In another chapter, through her encounter with a mentally handicapped inmate who was sentenced to death, reflects on the ruthless legal system which deprives women of their right to live. While interacting with the women wardens, Hu takes a humanistic stance and reflects on their ruthless behaviors as an outcome of an oppressive social system and the Nazi political environment. With a goal of "uniting China's Anti-Japanese War with Anti-Imperialist movements in the whole world" (95), Hu's autobiographical narrative serves as a vehicle for a women-oriented political criticism. At the end of the diary when she is released from prison, Hu reflects on her friendship with German women activists and friends, vows "never to become so weak as to lose your reason," and aspires to a "future of light and glory" (249). If both Xie's and Hu's texts and by becoming soldiers and generals themselves prioritized their militant and political roles and not their identity as writers, Bai transformed her writer's identity by making the front the subject of her autobiographical reportage. Born as Liu Donglan in 1912 to an intellectual family in Shenyang, north China, Bai was one of the most prominent northeast writers who were forced into exile from their hometown after the Japanese occupation of Manchuria. With her husband writer Feng Luo (羅峰), Bai fled to Shanghai and then to Chongqing, while participating in anti-Japanese activities in her exile. When the Japanese approached Chongqing in 1939, she quit breastfeeding her infant child and left the child with her mother and participated in the Writers' War Area Interview Group organized by the leftist All China Resistance Association of Writers and Artists. Bai kept a diary which recorded her encounters during the march for two and a half months. On the way, one of the writers died due to illness and several others including the author herself had to return from the front due to their deteriorating health. The diary came to an end when Bai had to leave because of her poor health.

Before I analyze Bai's text, I present a brief overview of China's reportage literature and the context of women's autobiographical reportage in the early twentieth century. China's reportage literature could be traced to the late nineteenth century when news reports provided opportunities for the union of prose and journalist writing. After Opium Wars in the nineteenth century, a generation of reportage literature appeared including *戊戌政變記* (An account of the 1898 Coup) written by Qichao Liang (梁啟超) and during the May Fourth Movement many leftist political writers took on the genre of reportage to reflect on patriotic themes, depict the Northern Expedition against the feudal war lords, and later anti-imperialist endeavors. Their works introduced lyrical elements to the genre, although many of the authors did not claim consciously their works as reportage literature (see, e.g., Xia). Representative works of this period include the 1919 *二十一日聽審的感想* (Thoughts on the Trial of May 21st) by Bing Xin (冰心), the 1921 *饑鄉紀程* (Journey to the Land of Hunger) by Qiubai Qu (瞿秋白), Xie's War Diary, the 1938 *三等病房* (Third-Class Hospital Ward) by Bai Wei (白薇), the 1938 *戰地書簡* (Letters from the Battlefield) by Xueyin Yao (姚雪垠), and the 1939 *延安訪問記* (A Visit to Yan'An) by Xuezhao Chen (陳學昭).

Writing reportage literature presented women with "new models of moral responsibilities and ethical obligations" (Reus and Isandizaga 266). Dooling observes that "early female practitioners of reportage often offered a distinctively gendered vision of the historical crises sweeping urban China" (12; see also Laughlin).

The Fourteen of Us was published at the height of the Sino-Japanese War and it catered to the demand for literary works during wartime and answered the calls for "a great era" (3). In the context of May Fourth literature, this allusion was evoked by numerous intellectuals and writers to reflect on their newly endowed social, political, and military agency. Scholars frequently "equate *cong wen* (taking to literature) with *cong rong* (joining the army)" (see, e.g., Pusey 22). Lu Xun, for instance, joined the revolutionary army and became "a soldier in the realm of the spirit" (Pusey 22). Bai's journey with the Writers' Group reflects such a nationalist sentiment of re-imagining and localizing writers' identity in battle scenes. However, Bai's gendered subjectivity intervenes at the very beginning of the expedition. The preface of her diary begins with a painful reflection on her role as a mother before her impending journey with the Writers' Group, which she had anticipated for years. She comments that "what is most undividable is the love between mother and child; what is most difficult to be resolved are the life problems of one's family" (1). Along with this emotional dilemma in choosing between family duties and nationalistic course, Bai felt an anxiety related to writing: "this great epoch demands literature with flesh and blood. Yet I have been completely entrapped in the small circles of family and occupied by the daily necessities and caring of my child. I have been entirely alienated from the outside, particularly the frontier. Without enough material, my thinking lacks substance and is inflexible. This creates the ultimate pain in me" (2). Bai's regrets about her incapability to fulfill her duties as a citizen, of participating in "building a new China in the future" prompted her to leave her child before for the battle field. The act of took on symbolic significance suggesting the sacrifice of maternal duties for the course of defending the country. Paradoxically, it suggests women's own disembodiment under the special social, economic, and political situations of the war.

In comparison with Xie's diary which explores a militant self, Bai's reportage portrays the frontier through large amounts of carefully organized on-site interviews with soldiers, military leaders, rural peasants, workers, women's associations, and activists in exile who devoted themselves to resisting against the invading Japanese troops and the puppet armies in the occupied northern part of China. The mission of Bai's march with thirteen other writers to the frontline was to provide spiritual support and media impact for those fighting at the front. Supported by leftist writer Lao She, at each stop during their march, the writers broke into small groups, conducted spontaneous individual interviews with war heroes and villagers in the provinces of Shanxi, Sichuan, and Shaanxi, and collected anecdotes and folktales about residents' heroic deeds in the war. In order to boost the morale for soldiers and peasants through education and entertainment, the Writers' Group's organized local literary and artistic activities. Through interviews with soldiers, peasant troops, and anti-Japanese intellectuals in exile, the writers explored the possibilities of literature and provided a panoramic vision of war as a nationalistic course and a personal encounter with fear, separation, and sacrifice. In comparison with Xie's War Diary which endowed her with personal military and political agency at the front, Bai's participation in the march repositioned her as a literary soldier who, like Lu Xun, took her pen as a powerful weapon for the course of national salvation. Bai's exploration of the frontline, in comparison with other first-person war reportages of the time, carries distinctive values and insights because of her own identity as a northeastern war-resistance writer in exile. A second focus in Bai's diary is the detailed portrayal of women's political activism during the Sino-Japanese war. She describes meetings with women in the China Industrial Cooperative, which was launched by New Zealand educator and social activist Alley Rewi in 1937 to support the economic recovery of occupied Shanghai and Bai paid numerous visits to women workers and organized women's literacy classes (28-30). In occupied areas of Shanxi province, Bai collected tales about peasant women's endeavors in fighting the Japanese troops. She also interviewed female guerilla soldiers and members of women's salvation societies. Her immersion in the daily life of women activists at the front depicts how grassroots women movements in times of conflict and war respond to the nationalistic and patriotic ideals through sisterhood and acts of heroism. Thus Bai integrated social observations of wartime China with thoughts about political challenges. In her visits to rural areas in Shanxi province, Bai depicted with great compassion the impoverished condition of local peasants whose meagre life deteriorated because of geographical and material limitations and the Japanese invasion. While reflecting on China's internal challenges, Bai also depicted missionaries, religious groups, and physicians from the West who volunteered to help at the front.

In conclusion, these pioneering women's narratives reconfigure women's social, political, and historical roles through life writing. Dooling holds that wartime women's autobiographies in light of "feminist literary historiography, powerfully articulates a sense of women engaging on the front lines of national history" (13). Contrary to the perception that early twentieth-century Chinese women's military activism was facilitated through assimilation into male identities, Xie's, Hu's, and Bai's texts show that women celebrated their womanhood through mass mobilization and dedicated services at the front as soldiers, activists, and reporters. Xie's diary provides rich portrayals of a woman soldier's strategic appropriation of the front as a space of feminine self-discovery and liberation. Her declaration of upholding women's emancipation as a core task of nationalistic revolution illustrates an outspoken feminist political consciousness. Further, Xie's multiple authorial postures as narrator, interviewer, commentator, revolutionist, and activist correspond to her multiple socio-political roles at war. Likewise, Hu's text presents the prison memoir as an innovative political genre of life writing. Her unadorned narrative recounts women's resistance against fascist oppression through organized political activities and mass mobilization. Her polyphonic memoir gives a life-like depiction of progressive women with socio-political commentaries. In comparison with Xie and Hu who both adopted new soci-

etal roles as soldier or political activist, Bai took to reportage: by participating in and recording on the Left League Writers Group, Bai explored new ethical choices as a literary soldier in China's anti-Japanese war. These wartime women's life narratives exemplify how their authors transformed the format of life writing, how they aspired to cross social, political, and ideological boundaries, and how they explored new ideals of womanhood.

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